

Ethiopia: Restoring Peace and Democratic Reforms

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Chair Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record.

Recent events in context

The devastating developments of the past three weeks have brought immeasurable human suffering and the destruction of livelihoods, and appear to have returned Ethiopia to yet another protracted civil war, nearly 30 years after it emerged from its last civil war. These tragic events have also dealt a deadly blow to what would have been one of the most consequential democratic transitions on the African continent, with significant repercussions for enduring peace and stability across the Horn of Africa.

Hostility between the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which ruled the Tigray Region for three decades, and the federal government in Addis Ababa, had simmered for two-and-a-half years prior to the dramatic escalation of tensions on the night of November 3. This animosity contributed to deepening rifts among communities and has ultimately caused profound damage to the prospect of an inclusive and democratic pan-Ethiopian project that could have been an inspiration to millions across Africa.

Federal troops entered Mekele this past weekend, and the federal government announced that it had “completed and ceased” military operations in the Tigray Region. However, many fear that the conflict could morph into a protracted civil war that could cause the loss of many more lives and worsen a humanitarian crisis. With a communications blackout imposed in the Tigray Region since the start of the fighting in early November, and the entrenched practice by both parties of using public communication tools to disseminate highly politicized propaganda messages, efforts to independently assess the situation have been difficult.

A troubled transition

Growing political differences between the federal government, led by the EPRDF, and the TPLF over how to manage the political transition since the beginning of 2018 have created a tense environment. The two parties failed to resolve these differences within the constitutional framework, owing both to the obstructionist stance the TPLF adopted toward Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s policies of political liberalization, and to the historically uncompromising positions of key segments of the EPRDF establishment, which have prevented democratic progress for decades. Yet the underlying challenges that impede Ethiopia’s efforts to step out of decades of authoritarian rule and build a democratic system are far more complex, and are structural in nature.

Throughout its nearly 30-year tenure, the EPRDF expressed hostility toward individual freedoms and a competitive political system in which citizens might freely elect their leaders and hold them accountable. This makes it very difficult for the government to usher in a genuine transformation of the political economy while this same political group seeks to remain the sole decision-maker overseeing the nature and direction of this transformation.

The EPRDF leadership was not on the same page internally as to the breadth and pace of reform when they decided to implement limited changes in the face of raging antigovernment protests in late 2017. Among the leadership, there were some who clearly

saw that nothing short of far-reaching and immediate reforms would satisfy the demands of the protesters. On the other hand, a sizable portion of the leadership and party rank-and-file wanted to use reform rhetoric to buy breathing space and advance the goal of self-preservation. This lack of a unified stance on the need and extent of reforms put the different factions within the party leadership at odds with one another at a time when mutual distrust among coalition members had also reached an all-time high. The absence of a shared perspective regarding the reforms led to a failure to come up with a coherent approach to addressing citizen demands or a clear path to manage the transition to democratic rule.

This disunity among the EPRDF leadership gave Prime Minister Abiy a free hand to push a vigorous set of changes without having to wait for the approval of the party. As a result, much of the extensive political and legal reforms undertaken in the first few months of the transition were invariably attributed to the singular focus Abiy Ahmed placed on thoroughly transforming the party into a democratic platform and altering the government's authoritarian policies.

As these initial reform measures drew massive support for Abiy's leadership, some of his comrades in the party begrudgingly fell into line while others continued to resent him. This very personalized approach to undertaking reforms was a stark departure from the highly centralized and often prolonged process of decision-making the EPRDF establishment had strictly adhered to throughout its tenure.

While Abiy Ahmed's approach of "shock therapy" was considered a fitting method of disentangling Ethiopia's political economy from decades of authoritarian rule, it had its own dangers. As would become clear, beyond the massive popular support Abiy enjoyed in the first few months of his tenure the approach did little to galvanize the political support he needed from his own party and other key political constituencies necessary to broaden the reformist base and put the transition on solid footing.

As a matter of fact, Abiy's inability to assert central government authority over swaths of the country as intercommunal clashes and political violence flared at unprecedented levels is in part attributable to this lack of consensus within an EPRDF establishment that retained strong control over all levers of government, including security, the civil service, and regional administrations.

Even as Abiy moved to dismantle the EPRDF and form the Prosperity Party in late 2019 by bringing together the ruling parties of all regional states except the TPLF, there was never a fundamental overhaul of the structures and the mindset of the federal and regional government bureaucracy and local security services that had enabled the EPRDF's near-total control of all aspects of public life. While Abiy's recent liberalization policies limited the state's reach to some degree, the administration has often relied on the preexisting structures to target real and perceived political opponents. The heavy-handed tactics that the government began employing in recent months—including the mass arrest of opposition supporters, imposing communication blackouts, and the use of deadly force against demonstrators—are all indications that these structures are once again being exploited to repress dissent.

Moreover, the loosening of political controls under Abiy has been accompanied by an increase in violence across the country, as different ethnic groups and regions push for greater autonomy and power. Many regional leaders and opposition politicians see the democratic opening and attendant reforms as a chance to grab more autonomy for their ethnic group and increase access to sources of rent and political clout at the center.

In furtherance of these goals, many of these regional political actors including those within the ruling party have spent enormously from state resources to beef up largely ethnic-based special forces and local militias. Reluctant to embrace a national political agenda that fosters a strong and unified central government, they often employ inflammatory rhetoric of historical injustices, and issue thinly veiled calls for attacks against members of other communities to pressure the government into submitting to their demands. The result of

this has been an unprecedented escalation of ethnic and intercommunal clashes, as well as targeted attacks on ethnic and religious minorities over the past two years that have killed thousands of people and displaced millions more.

Zero-sum politics

Despite these enormous challenges, hope for Ethiopia's transition to democratic rule slipped further away when the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the postponement of widely anticipated elections scheduled for August 2020. Following the declaration of a state of emergency in April, the House of Federation, the upper chamber of parliament with the power to interpret the constitution, adopted the recommendation of the Council of Constitutional Inquiry (CCI) to allow the current federal and regional governments to remain in office until elections are held within 9 to 12 months, once the government can declare that COVID-19 no longer threatens public health.

Many opposition groups including the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) reacted to the elections' postponement with understanding, reasoning that the additional time could be used to narrow differences among political forces on the trajectory of the transition and to formulate shared benchmarks to measure the progress of ongoing electoral reforms. However, other opposition parties rejected the government's unilateral decision to effectively extend its own term, and reiterated calls for the formation of a caretaker government to manage the transition and organize general elections.

As polarization deepened, in September the TPLF held elections in Tigray in defiance of the federal government's decision to postpone them. After declaring a nearly 100 percent victory, the TPLF declared the federal government to be illegitimate, and called for a caretaker government to be established. The federal government declared the elections null and void, suspended federal subsidies to Tigray, and halted direct engagement with the regional government. On the night of November 3, Abiy ordered the deployment of federal troops into the Tigray Region after TPLF forces attacked the Northern Command, which

was stationed in the region—presaging a conflict that has rights organizations warning of a humanitarian disaster, and which continues today.

In the meantime, the tense situation had escalated over the summer after a spate of political violence sparked by the killing of the Oromo singer Haccaalu Hundeessa in Addis Ababa in July. More than 300 people were killed, and the government imposed a complete shutdown of the internet that lasted for over two weeks. Security forces arrested more than 7,000 people suspected of involvement in the weeklong violence and looting that took place in different parts of the country, including prominent opposition political figures, journalists, and local government officials. Some opposition leaders are facing terrorism charges—a tactic of repression common during Ethiopia’s period of authoritarian rule.

The July violence and the government’s heavy-handed response to it marked the further erosion of human rights and democratic norms and a dramatic narrowing of the political space.

Recurring political violence and growing limits on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association also undermined efforts by civil society organizations and human rights groups that sought to take advantage of the improved policy and regulatory framework to enhance their work of monitoring and documenting human rights in Ethiopia, educating the public, and holding violators accountable.

What went wrong?

A series of missed opportunities in the last two-and-a-half years led to the tragic derailment of a promising democratic experiment. A half-hearted effort at implementing reforms by a ruling party reluctant to shed its deeply authoritarian roots stands in the way of a genuine, all-inclusive political process. This is consistent with the core feature of the EPRDF establishment, which has repeatedly failed to see a middle ground on anything throughout its tenure. The latest descending of political differences into an armed confrontation between the federal government and the TPLF are a consequence of the

winner-take-all delusions held by parts of the EPRDF establishment, which have plagued Ethiopia's democratic progress for decades.

For its part, much of the political opposition lacks a clear vision, and their failure to stand behind stated goals and hold their leaders to account has left these groupings without a solid support base. Instead of seizing and making maximum use of political openings that come along once in a generation, the opposition often engages in personal squabbles, spouts ethnic and territorial rhetoric and pursues parochial interests. They are often not clear-eyed about the immensely asymmetrical nature of the power relationship between them and the government, and fail to pursue political tactics responsive to that reality. They are overly focused on power-sharing arrangements with the government, rather than on efforts to secure institutional reforms that will ensure free democratic discourse and competitive elections.

Recommendations

While Ethiopia's political problems have complex historical and cultural origins, many of them can be addressed by adopting a political culture that prioritizes dialogue as a means of managing different views.

To support this endeavor and efforts to bring Ethiopia back to the path of democratic transition, the United States should take several steps:

Urge the Ethiopian government and political forces to engage in broad-based and comprehensive national dialogue to address core issues and reach a political settlement ahead of the 2021 national elections. Significant resources have been spent on mainly state-led dialogue initiatives. None of them succeeded, as they followed the same ineffective model of organizing large gatherings without a clearly defined set of objectives and agreed-upon rules of engagement. For dialogue initiatives to be effective and get the political process back on track, they should incorporate several steps:

- Dialogue should be preceded by an audit of political actors, conducted by an independent group of civil society, community, academic, and other relevant figures. It should be inclusive, and reject the idea of what many call an elite pact—but should also be preceded by an audit of all political groups in Ethiopia to determine which ones represent legitimate viewpoints and interests of communities. There are over 170 political parties; very few of these have an active membership.
- Dialogue should be guided by rules agreed to by all parties. Among other points, these rules should identify independent facilitators and sanctions for noncompliance.
- All parties must explicitly renounce the use of violence as a political tool and agree to refrain from inciting supporters to engage in illegal activities in pursuit of political goals.
- To foster legitimacy and confidence in the dialogue initiatives, individuals imprisoned because of their political views, journalists, and other dissidents should immediately be released, and charges against them dropped.
- Independent civil society, community, and thought leaders should be represented in all steps of the dialogue.

Urge the Ethiopian government to allow an independent investigation of human rights abuses committed in the context of the recent armed conflict, and during political upheaval in the recent past. The United States should provide independent human rights investigators with technical and financial assistance so they may monitor, document, and report on these abuses and pursue efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

Adopt more consistent, coherent, balanced, and principled messaging and policy concerning Ethiopia across all branches of government, effectively coordinate messaging with Ethiopia’s development partners, and ensure that messaging reaches the Ethiopian public. The United States should work to rectify the perceived bias toward Egypt in negotiations concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), while at

the same time making clear that the United States prioritizes peaceful resolution of political differences and the protection of civilians. A positive view of the United States among the Ethiopian public can go a long way toward ensuring the success of US-led efforts to help resolve the current political crisis.

Increase support to democratic institutions and independent media outlets that promote a culture of dialogue and accountability. The United States should recognize and assist efforts by institutions such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to uphold principles of domestic and international human rights norms.

Use a rights-based approach to address the damaging effects of disinformation and dangerous speech that originate from diaspora communities. While some diaspora members are engaged in important peace-building efforts, others fan the flames of hatred and division, largely through social media.

Conclusion

There is no enduring solution to the underlying political problems that come out of a military engagement. It is even more terrifying to think of what comes after the conclusion of active military operations. Ethiopia cannot afford prolonged armed conflict and a protracted political stalemate. The longer this situation persists, the more it will cost human lives, deepen communal divisions, and create the conditions for human rights violations, mass atrocities, and humanitarian crisis. Deescalating conflicts and resuming a genuine and all-inclusive dialogue that will not preclude accountability for serious human rights abuses is the only viable way out of the current political deadlock.